



Sailing Through your Fears

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Having diabetes rock your life, increasing stress and fear of change, complications and even death. Don't let waves of anxiety engulf you; Henry Lew, psychologist, steers you out of the storm with sound advice.

Having diabetes may involve facing storms in your life, sometimes even on a daily basis. There are significant lifestyle changes to make initially (e.g., diet, exercise) and adjustments to fit in a medication regimen.

As you navigate your way through unknown territory, this can be quite unsettling and anxiety provoking as it involves giving up the old lifestyle and adopting a new unfamiliar one.

On top of these, there is the lingering dread of potential complications (e.g., retinopathy, blindness, loss of sensation in hands and feet, kidney damage).

Then there is the fear of death.

These worries can spin out of control and make it very distressing and hard to concentrate on making the needed lifestyle changes or they may make one more irritable and affect interpersonal relationships.

How can you manage these fears better?

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

Knowledge is not only power, but knowledge also offers emotional stability. A lot of the times, we think about how terrible our life can be if we develop complications from our diabetes or if our complications worsen. And it feels very real that these things are going to happen.

But we are only focusing on one possibility. We can easily forget that there is another. Many of these risks or early stage complications can be managed through our lifestyle changes to diet and exercise, and monitoring our glucose levels and taking our medication regularly.

The risks and complications are scary but that does not mean that nothing can be done about them. Finding out more from doctors, nurses, dietitians and professionals helps us to understand these risks better and focus on what you can do to prevent or manage complications. It may offer us some emotional anchorage and help diminish the fear.

LOOK AT THE FACTS

The way we view things can make better or worse our anxiety. Often, our misperceptions may make us feel that it is the end of the world when our blood sugar levels go up or remain consistently high.

For instance, in a national survey in the United States recently, it was found that diabetes patients experience four times more fear about the possibility of amputation, and two times more fear about risk of blindness, compared with the possibilities of developing heart diseases and other illness.

Although no such survey has been carried out in Singapore, anecdotal clinical observations suggest that diabetes patients do experience these fears as well. This is ironic as the health consequences of developing other chronic illness might be more serious and debilitating than the health consequences from complications. Hence, it helps to look at the facts and recognise that our perceptions might be “exaggerating” the potential health risks and consequences.

IN CONTROL

There are things we can do to regain a sense of self-control and to manage our anxiety. Research and clinical data have shown that diabetes can be managed with consistent self-management.

However, we tend to be too consumed by the idea that because we have a family history of diabetes, and because our genes are beyond our control, we too may end up with diabetes. This may lead to thoughts and feelings that our health is predetermined and very much out of our control, increasing our anxiety. However, if we focus on what we can control, which is our behaviours (diet, exercise, etc), we can certainly manage our health outcome.

ARRESTED FEELINGS

Instead of letting our feelings control us, we can make use of them instead. At certain points, we may feel demoralised that our efforts are not producing marked improvements to our blood sugar. Unfortunately, sometimes when our diabetes condition worsens, we may feel that the future is bleak and that our health may go downhill from there.

We may also feel fearful of death. Facing the fact that you might die one day can compel change for the better though. This is illustrated quite well by Charles Dickens’ classic tale, “A Christmas Carol”. We may become calmer, and more able to ignore distractions and anxieties and focus on what is truly important in your life (e.g., loving relationships).

Fear and anxiety are like waves in the oceans. They can get the better of us and engulf us. But there are ways we can adopt to manage them and use them to help motivate us and sail forward to manage our diabetes better and steer clear of complications.